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# Phosphorus Index for Alabama

## *A Planning Tool to Assess & Manage P Movement*

Non-point source phosphorus (P) pollution of surface waters is a complex set of processes that involves P application, its buildup in soils, and its transport to surface waters. High P application in the form of fertilizers or manures can increase the risk of P transport to surface waters, but unless there is loss in runoff, the risk is minimal. Extremely high soil test P also increases the risk of P enrichment, but there must be detachment and/or dissolution and transport of P before there is an environmental concern. Excessive P in surface waters is an environmental concern.

### **PHOSPHORUS CONCERNS IN THE ENVIRONMENT**

Eutrophication can be caused by the nutrient enrichment of a water body. Nutrient movement in runoff and erosion from agricultural nonpoint sources is a resource management concern. The movement of phosphorus in runoff from agricultural land to surface water can accelerate eutrophication. The result of eutrophic conditions and excessive plant growth is the depletion of oxygen in the water. This is due to the heavy oxygen demand by microorganisms as they decompose the organic material. Phosphorus is generally the limiting nutrient in fresh water systems and any increase in P usually results in more aquatic vegetation. Society is concerned about maintaining clean drinking water. This concern has forced the inclusion of a cost for removing the color, turbidity, taste, and odor

associated with the high trophic condition and vegetation growth in surface water brought about by excessive nutrients. Because of this concern, proper management of P in fertilizers, manures, and the soil is paramount in preventing nonpoint source pollution.

### **P INDEX CONCEPT**

The P index is a tool to assess the site and management practices for potential risk of phosphorus movement to water bodies. The ranking of the P index identifies fields where the risk of phosphorus movement is relatively higher than that of other sites. When the parameters of the index are analyzed, it will become apparent that individual parameters could be influencing the index disproportionately. These identified parameters should be the basis for planning corrective soil and water conservation practices and management techniques.

The P Index uses specific field features and management practices to obtain an overall rating for each field. Not all field features and management practices have the same influence and input because research has shown that relative differences exist in the importance of each to P loss. Assigned to each of the field features and management practices are **weighted factors** of 1, 2, or 3. Also, assigned to each of the field features and management practices are **value ratings** of VERY LOW / LOW (0 points), MEDIUM (1 points), HIGH (2 points), VERY

HIGH (4 points), and EXTREMELY HIGH (8 points). Multiplying the **weighed factor** by the **value rating** yields points for that specific field feature or management practice. Based on a summation of the points, the field will fall into an overall category rating of LOW, MEDIUM, HIGH, VERY HIGH, or EXTREMELY HIGH.

Currently, these weighted factors are based on research as well as professional judgment. As more research becomes available, the P Index will be periodically reviewed and updated.

<b>Field Features, Management Practices, &amp; Weighted Factors Used in the P Index</b>	
<b>Field Feature or Mgt. Practice</b>	<b>Weighted Factor</b>
1. Soil Test P	1
2. Phosphorus Application Rate	3
3 Nutrient Application Method	3
4. Grazing Animals	1
5. Subsurface Drainage & Underground Outlet System	3
6. Erosion Rate	3
7. Hydrologic Soil Group	3
8. Field Slope	1
9. Distance to Water (ft.)	3
10. Filter Strip Width (ft.)	2
11. Impaired or Outstanding Waters	3

## ***DESCRIPTION OF FIELD FEATURES AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES***

**1. Soil Test P Value** considers the extractable P concentration for surface soils (0 – 3 inches in sod crops and depth of plow layer in cultivated crops) based on the double acid (Mehlich 1) or Mississippi extract procedures, depending on the soil. Research indicates that high soil test P levels may only play a small role in determining the amount of P in runoff unless soil erosion and sediment movement into water is high.

**2. Phosphorus Application Rate** is the application rate of organic phosphorus and/or phosphate fertilizer in pounds per acre per year of  $P_2O_5$  that is applied to the site. The phosphate application rate includes all sources of phosphorus whether from organic sources such as animal manure, compost, poultry litter or commercial fertilizer.

**3. Nutrient Application Method** considers the manner that phosphate fertilizer or organic P is applied to the site and the amount of time that the P fertilizer or organic P is exposed on the soil surface. Injection implies that the fertilizer P is buried below the soil's surface at a minimum depth of two inches. Incorporation is the mixing of the P into the surface portion of soil.

**4. Grazing Animals** considers the effect of animals to cause excessive movement of P into streams and other surface waters. Surface waters include streams, springs, branches, lakes, sinkholes, wetlands, or other related waterbodies. Farm ponds contained within the tract that do not have a continuous water flow are not considered unless the producer considers the farm pond to be sensitive and important. Large number of animals with unlimited access to waterbodies or feeding animals in sensitive areas such as drainage ways, concentrated flow areas, or adjacent to a stream can be a contributor to excessive P in waterbodies.

**5. Terrace Tile Outlets and Subsurface Drains With Open Inlets** may convey runoff water directly to a waterbody, ditch or drainageway without the filtering effect of vegetation and can be major way for dissolved P to enter a waterbody. Systems with open inlets should empty onto a grass filter or vegetative outlet.

**6. Soil Erosion** considers the risk of movement of sediment bound P in runoff. RUSLE and the gully equation are used to estimate the total soil erosion. Field information needed to determine the erosion rate includes dominant soil type; type of crop cover; soil hydrologic group; soil erodibility; slope length; slope and information on contouring, ridge heights, and terracing; and gullies.

## **7. Runoff Class (Hydrologic Soil Group)**

considers the runoff potential of the site. The soils of Alabama are in four hydrologic soil groups. These groupings are based on runoff-producing characteristics of the soil.

These groupings (Hydrologic Soil Groups) are:

- **A - Low runoff potential.** These soils have a high infiltration rate even when thoroughly wetted. They mainly consist of deep, well drained to excessively drained sands or gravels and have a high rate of water transmission.
- **B - Moderate runoff potential.** Soils of this group have a moderate infiltration rate when thoroughly wetted. They are moderately deep to deep, moderately well drained to well-drained soils that have moderately fine to moderately coarse textures. They have a moderate rate of water transmission.
- **C - Moderate high runoff potential.** The soils of this group have a slow infiltration rate when thoroughly wetted. They usually have a layer that impedes downward movement of water or have moderately fine to fine texture. They have a slow rate of water transmission.
- **D - High runoff potential.** The soils of this group have a very slow infiltration and thus a high runoff potential. They chiefly consist of clay soils that have high swelling potential, soils that have a permanent high water table, soils that have a claypan or clay layer at or near the surface and shallow soil over nearly impervious material. They have a very slow rate of water transmission.

When more than one hydrologic soil group occurs in the field, use the predominate group.

**8. Field Slope**, the inclination of the land surface from the horizontal, considers the average slope percent for the field based on the Soil Survey Report or actual field slopes if available. Field slope is given a weighted factor of 1 because slope is also considered in the soil erosion field feature.

## **9. P Application Distance to Water**

considers the distance in feet from the phosphorus application site or field to surface water that receives runoff from the field. Surface waters include streams, springs, branches, lakes, sinkholes, wetlands, or other related waterbodies. These waters will usually be identified on the U.S.G.S. topographic map. Farm ponds contained within the tract that do not have a continuous water flow are not considered unless the producer considers the farm pond to be sensitive and important.

**10. Filter Strip** considers the filtering effect of a vegetative filter strip at all areas where water will flow from the field. This includes the down slope edges of fields as well as where water enters conveyance structures such as ditches or concentrated flow areas within the field. The filtering effect must be from sheet flow across the filter strip. Concentrated flow entering a filter strip must be dispersed for effective filtering. Filter strips should be established to a dense, vigorous, permanent, stiff stem grass with a stem density of at least one stem per square inch. Filter strip in a pasture is only applicable under a controlled grazing system. If a filter strip is not required, then do not consider it on the P Index.

**11. Impaired, Outstanding Waters, or Critical Habitat Waters** considers the location of the application site in the watershed of a stream or stream segment on the 303(d) or 305(b) list impaired by nutrients from agriculture activities. Stream or stream segments include all associated perennial streams that are represented by a solid blue line on the U.S.G.S. topographic map. Also included are Outstanding Alabama Water (OAW), Outstanding National Resource Water (ONRW), public water supply, waters designated for shellfish and federally designated Critical Habitat waters for endangered and threatened species. Key Cave and its source waters in Lauderdale County and Cypress Creek and its tributaries to include all tributaries upstream from the junction of Burcham Creek, including Burcham Creek, but excluding Threet Creek and its tributaries in Lauderdale County are federally designated Critical Habitat for endangered and threatened species.

## ***Site-Specific Application of the P Index***

Within fields, components of the P Index such as slope, hydrologic soil group, and distance to watercourse may vary greatly. Thus, there may be an advantage to site-specific application of the P Index, to a resolution as small as field equipment can manage. This can be useful in terms of avoiding manure or nutrient applications in sensitive areas of the field and applying variable rates based on soil and crop capacity to absorb and retain nutrients in other areas of the field. However, it must be kept in mind that the P Index is only a crude estimator to rank sites on the relative risk of loss of P to surface water. Therefore, while the site-specific microscale approach can have advantages, it may not be seen to have value by all users. For some, a field level application of the P Index may be more appropriate.

## ***USE OF THE P INDEX***

The P Index is an approximation of risk. It was developed to rank relative risks, and its level should not be interpreted as an assurance of low P loss. It is a planning tool that can be used in resource management planning and should direct conservation efforts. The P Index can also provide a suite of management and conservation options available to a farmer to reduce the risk of P loss. This should result in more rational, lower cost efforts to minimize the

impact of intensive agriculture on water quality. It may also be useful in identifying sites, which do not have elevated soil test P, but which may also be prone to loss of surface P applications.

## ***REFERENCES***

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# Alabama Phosphorus Index

Field Features & Management Practices		Field Feature & Management Practices Value Ratings				
	Weight	Very Low / Low (0 points)	Medium (1 point)	High (2 points)	Very High (4 points)	Extremely High (8 points)
Source Characteristics						
1. Soil Test P Value	1	Very Low / Low	Medium	High	Very High	Extremely High
2. P Application Rate (lbs. P <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub> /ac/year)	3	None applied	< 60 lbs.	60-120 lbs.	120-180 lbs.	>180 lbs.
3. Nutrient Application Method	3	None applied	Injected deeper than 2"	Incorporated immediately or sprinkler applied	Surface applied & incorporated < 30 days	Surface applied, not Incorporated
4. Grazing Animals	1	None	No access to water and/or not fed in sensitive area	Restricted access to water &/or not fed in sensitive area	Unlimited access to water &/or fed in sensitive area <100 animals	Unlimited access to water &/or fed in sensitive area >100 animals
Transport Characteristics						
5. Underground Outlet Systems	3	None	Outlets empty onto at least 30 ft. of grass filter strip	Outlets empty into grass waterways	< 30% of field has outlets emptying into drainageways or waterbodies	> 30% of field has outlets emptying into drainageways or waterbodies
6. Erosion Rate (tons/ac/yr)	3	< 3 tons	3-5 tons	5-10 tons	10-15 tons	> 15 tons
7. Hydrologic Soil Group	3	--	A	B	C	D
8. Field Slope (%)	1	< 1%	1-3%	3-5%	5-8%	> 8%
9. P Application Distance to Water (ft)	3	> 400 ft.	200-400 ft.	100-200 ft.	50-100 ft.	< 50 ft.
10. Filter Strip Width (ft)	2	≥ 50 ft.	30-49 ft.	20-29 ft.	10-19 ft.	<10 ft.
Receiving Water Categories						
11. Impaired, Outstanding, or Critical Habitat Waters	3	Field not in watershed	> 400 ft.	200-400 ft.	100-200 ft	<100 ft

## Field Vulnerability for Phosphorus Loss

Total Points from P Index	Generalized Interpretation of P Index
≤ 65	<b>VERY LOW / LOW</b> potential for P movement from the field. There is a low probability of an adverse impact to waterbodies.
66 to 75	<b>MEDIUM</b> potential for P movement from the field. The chance of organic material and nutrients getting into waterbodies exists. Buffers, setbacks, lower manure rates, cover crops, and crop residue practices alone or in combination may reduce impact.
76 to 85	<b>HIGH</b> potential for P movement from the field. The chance of organic material and nutrients getting to waterbodies is likely. Buffers, setbacks lower manure rates, cover crops, crop residues, etc. in combination may reduce impact.
86 to 95	<b>VERY HIGH</b> potential for P movement from the field and an impact on waterbodies.
≥ 96	<b>EXTREMELY HIGH</b> potential for P movement from the field and an adverse impact on waterbodies.